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AUTHOR Axia, Giovanna; Argenti, Emanuela
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ABSTRACT

The development of linguistic politeness in 7- and 9-year-old Italian children was examined. A total of 80 subjects, 40 males and 40 females, produced requests according to different contexts which were graphically presented. Factors considered for such contexts were: sex of the speaker; sex of the addressee; status of the addressee, either peer or older; and social role, either primary school child or university student. Results indicate that a development from simple knowledge of socio-linguistic principles for politeness to incorporation in language of concern for the other person can be observed between the ages of 7 to 9 years. From the age of 7, Italian boys and girls share the same socio-linguistic principles for politeness between sexes. They apparently apply such principles more to adults than to children. At both 7 and 9 years, boys and girls are equally polite. The 9-year-olds include more justifications in their requests than do the 7-year-olds. Nine-year-olds are also more aware of the need for politeness. (RH)

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CONTEXT AND LINGUISTIC POLITENESS IN 7- AND 9-YR-OLD ITALIAN CHILDREN

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Giovanna Axia and Emanuela Argenti
Università di Padova
Italia

Dipartimento di Psicologia dello Sviluppo
e della Socializzazione
Via Beato Pellegrino 26
35137 PADOVA
Italy

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ABSTRACT

The development of linguistic politeness in 7- and 9-yr-old Italian children is examined here. Eighty subjects (half males and half females) produced requests according to different contexts which were graphically presented. The factors considered for such contexts were: sex of the speaker × sex of the addressee × status of the addressee (peer, older) × social role (primary school child, university student). The results indicate that a development from simple knowledge of socio-linguistic principles for politeness to incorporation in language of concern for the other person can be observed between the ages from 7 to 9.

From the age of 7 years, Italian boys and girls share the same socio-linguistic principles for politeness between sexes. However, they apparently apply such principles more to the adults (university context) than to children (primary school context).

GENERAL FUNCTION OF LINGUISTIC POLITENESS

The main function of linguistic politeness is to mediate potential conflicts in dyadic exchanges. Sources of potential social conflicts in dyadic interactions are individual aims (how to have things got) and power (status, social distance etc.).

Politeness is a social construct which takes into account both sources of potential conflict and offer a sociable way to deal with them by means of language.

Sets of socio-linguistic rules for politeness are present in most cultures.

Linguistic politeness can be used as "social money" in a cost-benefit system. It allows the pursuit of individual aims plus the creation or the maintenance of positive dyadic interaction.

"Learning how to request is not just learning language of even just speech acts. It is also learning the culture and ***how to get things done by language*** in that culture" (Bruner, 1983, p. 115).

This aspect of politeness has been much studied and reported in literature on children's directives.

GOETHE
POLITENESS

"There is a politeness of heart which is close to love. From it the most convenient politeness of external behaviour derives" Goethe

"What politeness essentially consists of is a special way of treating people, saying and doing things in such a way ***to take into account the other person's feelings***" (Brown, 1980, p. 114).

Linguistic politeness can also be used beyond an individualistic – however sociable – view of human interaction. It may serve altruistic and pro-social aims.

This aspect of linguistic politeness has been less studied by developmental psychologists.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LINGUISTIC POLITENESS

A three-steps descriptive model drawn from my previous research is presented here:

Phase one

Children scarcely know politeness in language (Baroni & Axia, 1989). They recognize the partner's feelings and try to do something about them by means of language, but they do not use politeness (Axia & Baroni, 1985).

Phase two

At the age of seven children know some socio-linguistic rules of politeness (Axia & Baroni, 1984; Axia, McGurk & Glachan, 1988) and they use them to repair interaction (Axia & Baroni, 1985).

Phase three

At about the age of nine children become fully aware of the potentials of polite language in dyadic interactions (Axia, in preparation). They can incorporate *in language* both socio-linguistic rules and concern for the other person's feelings (Axia, McGurk & Glachan, 1989).

AIMS
OF THIS STUDY

- To investigate on children production of requests by means of a previously employed method in order to get comparable evidence for factors different from those already studied.

- To further assess the distinction between the phase two and the phase three of the above model.

- To examine the influence of gender on children linguistic politeness.

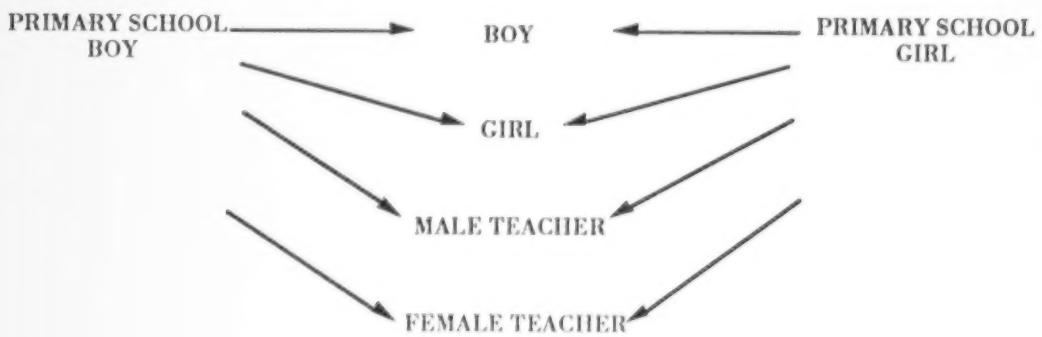
- To examine the influence of two different domains of social knowledge (primary school, university) on children linguistic politeness.

DESIGN
OF CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

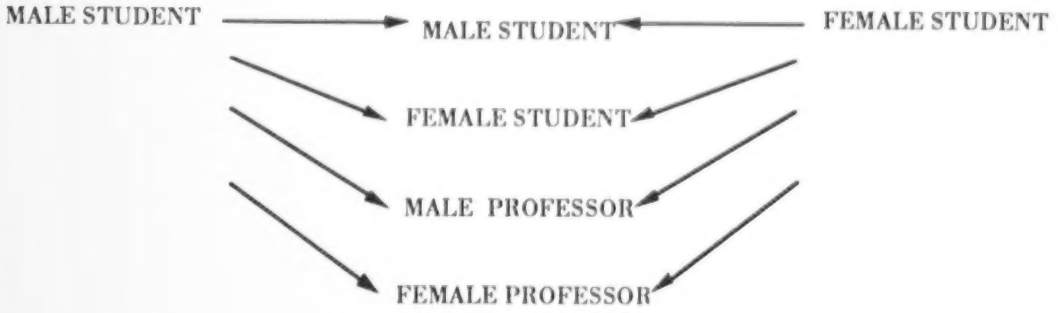
Subjects produced a request for each of the following social context (n. 16).

The arrows indicate the direction of the request.

PRIMARY SCHOOL



UNIVERSITY



Note

Both the degree of familiarity (low) and the "cost" of the request (low) were fixed.

METHOD

Subjects

were 80 middle-class Italian children, living in Milan: twenty 7-yr-old boys, twenty 7-yr-old girls, twenty 9-yr-old boys, twenty 9-yr-old girls.

Material

16 vignettes were employed, half representing a short story for the primary school environment and half for the university environment.

Each vignette presented one type of the above social contexts (see examples).

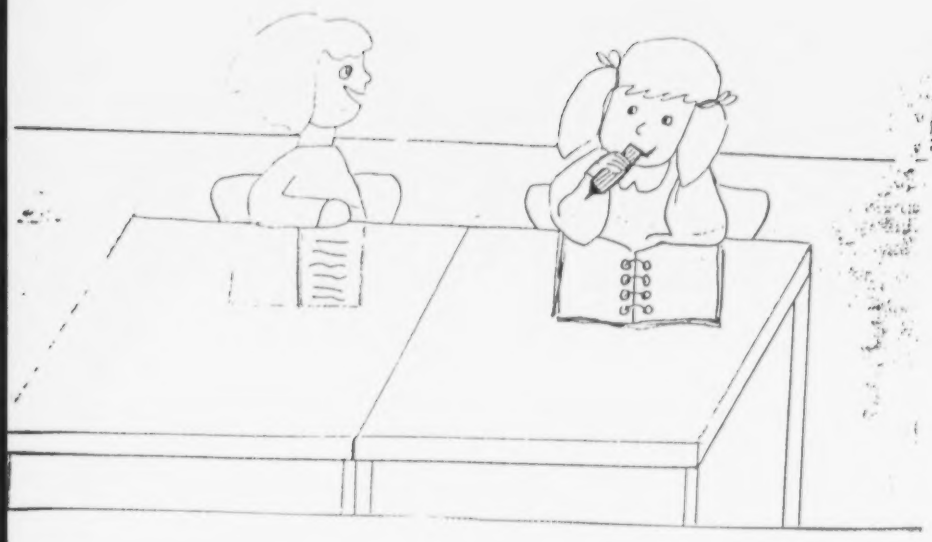
Procedure

Children were individually tested at school.

Each vignette was briefly explained (see examples) and the subject was asked: "what will x say to y?"; "Why do you think that s/he would say this?"

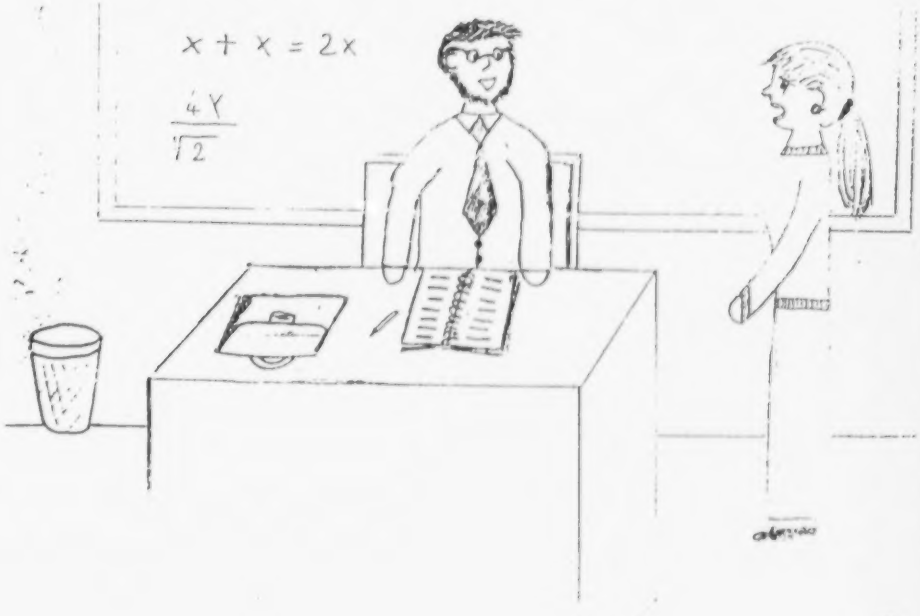
The interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed.

EXAMPLES OF MATERIAL USED



③ Federica is sitting close to Antonella. She asks Antonella for a few sheets from her note-book. What will Federica say to Antonella?

When the lesson is over, Sandra asks the professor for the titles of the books she must read. What will Sandra say to the professor?



SCORING CRITERIA FOR POLITENESS USAGE

Responses were scored in terms of presence or absence of four linguistic elements.

A. INTERROGATIVE FORMS (1)
for example "Mi dai?" (Will you give me) as opposed to the imperative "Dammi" (Give me).

B. "PER PIACERE" (PLEASE)

C. AUXILIARY VERB (1)
for example "puoi...." (Can you...?) or "Posso...?" (May I...?)

D. JUSTIFICATION FOR THE REQUEST MADE
when the subject incorporated her motives in the request (see the example in the next page)

(1) ***Important note***
In Italian the interrogative form does not necessarily incorporate an auxiliary verb as is the case in English.

EXAMPLE OF SCORED RESPONSES

Total amount of politeness was assigned to each response by computing the number of linguistic elements present (score range 0-4).

Score 0: "Dammi la penna" (Give me the pen)

Score1: "Dammi la penna, per piacere" (Give me the pen, please)

Score 4: "Mi puoi dare la penna per piacere? Ho lasciato la mia a casa" (Can you give me the pen, please? I forgot mine at home).

DESIGN OF THE ANOVA

Each vignette (total number 16) had a politeness score from 0 to 4. An ANOVA was carried out with the following design: ***Age of Subjects*** (7-, 9-yr-old) × ***Sex of Subjects*** (F,M) × ***Social Role*** (Primary school child, University student) × ***Status of Addressee*** (Peer, Older) × ***Sex of Speaker*** (F, M) × ***Sex of Addressee*** (F, M).

ANOVA RESULTS - 1

1. **AGE OF SUBJECTS** $F(1,76) = 8.42$ $p < .01$
   7-yr-olds, $\bar{x} = 2.24$ 9-yr-olds, $\bar{x} = 2.49$

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2. **SOCIAL ROLE** $F(1,76) = 42.55$ $p < .001$
   primary school children, $\bar{x} = 2.57$ university students $\bar{x} = 2.16$

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3. **STATUS OF ADDRESSEE** $F(1,76) = 34.69$ $p < .001$
   peer, $\bar{x} = 2.53$ older, $\bar{x} = 2.01$

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4. **SEX OF SPEAKER** $F(1,76) = 10.97$ $p < .01$
   male, $\bar{x} = 2.30$ female, $\bar{x} = 2.46$

---

5. **SEX OF ADDRESSEE** $F(1,76) = 8.39$ $p < .01$
   male, $\bar{x} = 2.44$ female, $\bar{x} = 2.30$

---

6. **SOCIAL ROLE × STATUS OF ADDRESSEE**
   $F(1,76) = 217.02$, $p < .001$

	$\bar{x}$ Peer Addressee	$\bar{x}$ Older Addressee
Primary school child	2.36	2.78
University student	2.71	1.62

ANOVA RESULTS - 2

7. SOCIAL ROLE × SEX OF SPEAKER

$F(1,76) = 4.45$ $p < .035$

	$\bar{x}$ Male Speaker	$\bar{x}$ Female Speaker
Primary school child	2.53	2.61
University student	2.03	2.30

---

8. STATUS OF ADDRESSEE × SEX OF SPEAKER

$F(1,76) = 8.26$ $p < .01$

	$\bar{x}$ Male Speaker	$\bar{x}$ Female Speaker
Peer addressee	2.52	2.55
Older addressee	2.03	2.37

---

9. SOCIAL ROLE × SEX OF ADDRESSEE

$F(1,76) = 8.98$ $p < .01$

	$\bar{x}$ Male Addressee	$\bar{x}$ Female Addressee
Primary school child	2.57	2.57
University student	2.31	2.02

---

10. SEX OF SPEAKER × SEX OF ADDRESSEE

$F(1,76) = 4.84$ $p < .028$

	$\bar{x}$ Male Speaker	$\bar{x}$ Female Speaker
Male addressee	2.29	2.58
Female addressee	2.26	2.33

SOCIO-LINGUISTIC PRINCIPLES

A. Primary school children are more polite than university students (R.2).

B. Female are more polite than males, especially when addressing males (R.4, 10)

C. Children are more polite to teachers than to peers, but students are more polite to mates than to professors (R.6,3)

D. Females and males are more polite to peers than to older addressees, but females are more polite than males to older addressees (R.8)

E. Primary school boys are about as polite as primary school girls, but female students are more polite than male students (R.7)

F. Primary school children are equally polite to male and to female addressees, while university students are more polite to males than to females.

AGE AND USE OF LINGUISTIC ELEMENTS OF POLITENESS

The use of each of the four linguistic elements was compared between the two age groups by t tests. Means are reported below.

LINGUISTIC ELEMENTS	AGE		p
	7-YR-OLDS	9-YR-OLDS	
Interrogative	15.65	15.37	n.s.
Please	7.52	5.42	.02
Auxiliary verb	6.35	10.20	.01
Justification	6.40	9.00	.01

(range, 0-16)

METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS

The responses to the question "Why do you think that s/he would say this?" were coded according to the following five categories.

Non pertinent, referring to trivial aspects of the vignette

Attributional, taking into account the character's reasons for the request

Social role, referring to the social roles represented in the scene

Conventions for requesting, referring to very general rules of requesting

Need for politeness, referring to the necessity of linguistic politeness in such context

AGE AND METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS

The two age groups were compared by t tests for each of the five categories of motivation.

The means are reported below:

CATEGORY OF MOTIVATION	AGE		p
	7-YR-OLDS	9-YR-OLDS	
Non pertinent	.87	.57	n.s.
Attributional	12.17	10.90	n.s.
Social roles	.2	.52	.02
Requesting rules	.52	.82	n.s.
Politeness	1.62	3.17	.02

(range 0-16)

FINAL REMARKS

- Main findings
  - nine-yr-olds globally were more polite than 7-yr-old
  - at both age levels, boys and girls were equally polite
  - nine-yr-olds included more justifications in their requests than 7-yr-olds
  - nine-yr-olds were more aware of the need for politeness than 7-yr-olds

- A development from simple knowledge of socio-linguistic rules (phase two) to incorporation in language of concern for the other person (phase three) was observed between the age from 7 to 9.
  The cognitive skill responsible for such development may be self-reflection, i.e. involvement of the self in the social context (Flavell, 1977).

- From the age of 7 years, boys and girls share the same socio-linguistic principles for politeness between sexes. However, they apparently apply such principles more to adults (university context) than to children (primary school context).

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